



# Emergency Management **UPDATE**

February 2001

## Incident Command System stars in Smyth

By Bob Lambert, Staff Writer

**W**hen you set up a drill to test your emergency response capabilities and incident command system, you never know how realistic that scenario will be.

In rural, mountainous Smyth County, Emergency Services Coordinator Charles P. Harrington used a multiple-injury school bus accident several times as a likely scenario, complete with communications difficulties.

When the call came the Friday before last Halloween, it was no drill.

A car pulled out of a side road on Route 600 and crashed into a school bus carrying 45 Chilhowie school children. Everyone, including the drivers of both vehicles, suffered injuries. Four of the children were critically injured.

A sheriff's deputy happening on the scene called in the accident. Preparation and practice assured that everyone knew what to do. Under the incident command system, the first rescue squad at the scene – in this case, Saltville – assumed full medical command of the situation. Other units arriving later worked together under a unified command.

Within an hour the nearly four-dozen people injured in the accident were taken to hospitals for medical treatment. The four



**Making the grade.** Often used as an exercise scenario, this multiple-injury school bus accident was no drill. This real-world emergency highlighted a critical need to establish a unified communications system to track with the unified incident command system responses (Photos by Dan Kegley, Smyth County News & Messenger).

An expanded version of this article is available on our Web site at [www.vdem.state.va.us/emupdate](http://www.vdem.state.va.us/emupdate). Contact Charles Harrington by phone at (540) 783-3381 or e-mail at [marionhousing@netva.com](mailto:marionhousing@netva.com).

seriously injured students were flown by helicopter to Bristol for medical treatment.

The astonishing rapid response to the accident in this mountainous rural county of 33,000 proved the value of the county's incident command system. It also sparked renewed urgency to replace the antiquated patchwork communications systems.

Emergency communications in mountainous regions can be a nightmare with old equipment. Several parallel systems

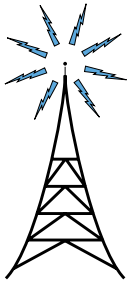
may have to be used among different emergency responders, causing delays and potentially lethal confusion.

"We don't have good coverage of the area and have to use multiple frequencies to communicate," Harrington says. "We were aware of how to make adjustments at the scene to get around the problem. In every one of our drills, I had to note that communications was a problem. We're finally getting a new system."

The county is developing specifications for the new equipment, which is expected to take about three years to implement. Soon, a unified communications system will track with a unified incident command system that proved itself in the real-world multiple-injury school bus accident.

"All our drilling and exercises really paid off," Harrington says. "We have spent a lot of time reviewing our mass-casualty incident response. It's an on-going program."

## Charlottesville wired for sound



**F**or most of the area around Charlottesville, NOAA radio is the sound of silence. You just can't get a signal in there.

Kaye Harden, emergency services coordinator for Charlottesville/Albemarle County, is changing that.

This spring, a 1,000-watt transmitter will start relaying National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration or NOAA radio with a strong signal, thanks to Harden's persistence, patience and a lot of teamwork.

"Five or six years ago, I realized that the little weather radios you can get at Radio Shack didn't work in our area," Harden says. "We're in a black hole for receiving weather radio transmissions."

Funding to buy and set up a transmitter that would reach the isolated area was a major obstacle. He got help from VDEM and National Weather Service Meteorologist Barbara Watson.

"The state thought about moving the transmitter to a new site to give better coverage," Harden says. "Then they discovered they could use mitigation funds. They were able to come up with the money and then we went to find a site."

The Albemarle County Police Department offered the use of its tower located near the University of Virginia observatory on Fan Mountain. The total cost for the transmitter and equipment was \$70,000 to \$80,000. The Albemarle County Radio Club has agreed to maintain the transmitter, to be delivered this spring.

"We're going to be able to cover Albemarle, Nelson, Fluvanna, Louisa and Greene counties and parts of Orange," Harden says. "It's going to make a big difference in an area where reception has been poor or nonexistent."

For further information, contact Kaye Harden at (804) 971-1263 or [harden@ci.charlottesville.va.us](mailto:harden@ci.charlottesville.va.us).



*In harm's way.* Already facing the constant menace of beach erosion, these homes also fell prey to hurricane-force winds and high water (FEMA News Photo by Dave Saville).

## Long-range planning can preserve waterfront vistas

By Bob Lambert, Staff Writer

**O**cean, bay, river, stream — people like to be close to the water. To ensure these dream homes don't become "paradise lost," builders and developers must address nature's destructive potential beforehand.

You have to look at a bigger picture of sustainable communities, says Professor Margot W. Garcia, Ph.D., Virginia Commonwealth University urban planning and land-use expert.

In her address to VDEM's Hazard Mitigation Planning Committee last fall, Garcia explained that sustainable development means either avoiding hazardous areas altogether or building to a higher standard to withstand damage from coastal storms and floods.

Either way, emergency managers can have an important impact on this type of mitigation planning.

"The first step is to be ruthlessly honest about the risk involved in building in certain areas, recognizing that some people will not see the risk and others will be cautious given the information," Garcia says.

"It is important to be rigorous in your analysis of the hazardous areas, assigning risk with the best data available and communicating that information as widely as possible so that landowners can make appropriate decisions."

VDEM Preparedness and Mitigation Division Director Mary Camp says land development has a long-term impact on a community's ability to respond to disasters.

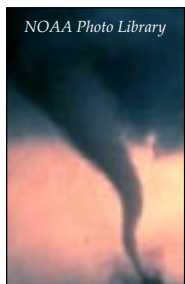
"You can raise a red flag of caution," Camp says. "Why put people in harm's way if you don't have to? Look at what a disaster could mean to your community. Mitigate in the broadest context of community values."

When communities develop coastal and riverfront areas, they are taking a gamble. How well they beat the odds depends on land-use policies, profit and tax revenues the land produces before disaster strikes and the cost of repairing damaged infrastructure. The higher the risk, the greater the pay-off with proper mitigation.

With long-term mitigation, such as what Garcia proposes, you site and design structures that minimize the risks before the first

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## Virginians to 'do the drill' in March



**M**ore than just a movie or child's board game, a "Twister" is a serious threat to life and property. Virginia has seen as many as 29 tornadoes ('93) in one year.

To focus attention on this unpredictable weather phenomena, Gov. Jim Gilmore has proclaimed March 27 as "Tornado Preparedness Day."

VDEM and the National Weather Service (NWS) are working in partnership to encourage schools, businesses and organizations across the state to hold tornado drills. NWS will activate the Emergency Alert System (EAS) and NOAA Weather Radio statewide on that date to facilitate local drills.

The NWS "Guide to Developing a Severe Weather Emergency Plan for Schools" is available on the VDEM Web site. Videos and brochures are available for local educational efforts. Contact Rohn Brown at (804) 897-6500, ext. 6519, for more information.



# Strange metamorphosis to bode 2001 Hazmat Odyssey?

By Greg Britt  
VDEM Hazmat Field Manager

**I**t's no secret that we live in a computer-oriented society. They are fixtures in the workplace and in almost every household.

We can communicate, research and produce major publications from the office or our living rooms at a fraction of the time and cost of a decade ago.

Y2K highlighted the significant role computer technology plays and will continue to play in the future of this state and this country. In the hazmat world, computers are also a valuable resource for training and response.

In the last three years, we have trained over 2,250 students in our hazmat program alone. In the last 15 years, programs involving hazardous materials awareness and prevention have increased dramatically. We now see training in all aspects of hazmat from the "cradle to the grave."

Without using any measurement tools other than empirical observation, it would appear that hazmat awareness and education has paid off.

From a peak in 1992 with over 2,100 notifications and 330 on-scene responses,



*Virtual Office. Area 2 Hazmat Officer Steve DeLisi can easily access reference sources, mapping and contingency plans from his laptop during a response (Photo illustration).*

our year 2000 numbers went down to 1,890 notifications and 135 on-scene responses.

No one agency or level of government can take credit for these changes. Collectively, through past experiences, government regulations, national standards, and thousands of hours of training, it appears that the hazmat world has gone through a "strange metamorphosis."

Now, the question I would pose to you is "Where do we go from here?"

In hazmat response, the days of the computer solving our problems are still at least a generation away. Even so, techni-

cians will still need to know how to dam, divert, plug, patch, over pack, apply leak kits and methodically work their way through an incident. As we move forward, we must also be cautious to ensure that the integration of computer technology into our program does not adversely affect our future students.

As a case in point, most automobiles produced after the mid-'80s have an on-board computer. Mechanical problems are almost exclusively diagnosed with the aid of a very expensive diagnostic automotive computer, which reduces and almost eliminates the mechanical and logical thinking of the mechanic.

To keep our program successful, we will need to ensure this doesn't happen to our technicians. In the coming years, we will need to continue training our responders using a battery of problem-solving scenarios. We will also have to keep on developing hands-on training that will challenge the thinking and abilities of our less-experienced responders. In essence, we need to stick to the basics.

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## Workshop offers keys to jumpstart CDE programs

By Rohn Brown, VDEM Public Affairs  
Outreach Coordinator

**I**nforming the public about disaster preparedness is a continual challenge for emergency managers.

What strategies can local emergency managers use to help overcome public apathy? How do you find and approach potential corporate partners when designing a Community Disaster Education (CDE) program?

When is the best time to launch an awareness campaign? Where can you find the latest disaster preparedness resources?

These are just a few of the questions that will be answered as part of the "Emergency Preparedness Community Outreach: An Organizer's Workshop."

Scheduled on May 1 at the Chesapeake Conference Center, this one-day class will give local emergency managers a jumpstart on planning their next CDE program.



To encourage student participation and networking, the class is limited to 40 students. There will be a special emphasis on using research results to help managers design strategic and effective disaster education programs.

Students who enroll for the workshop will automatically be added to the VDEM Community Disaster Education e-mail list and receive the latest in CDE information. The registration deadline is April 13.

For a complete course description and registration instructions on all emergency management training, visit the VDEM Web site at [www.vdem.state.va.us/train](http://www.vdem.state.va.us/train).

## This month in Virginia storm history

**B**etween Feb. 12 and March 10, 1960, four winter storms battered Virginia.

The first, a monster storm, dropped six inches to a foot all the way from Louisiana to Canada and caused six deaths in Virginia. The second struck February 18-20, dropping up to two feet in the western Virginia mountains.

In the third, from March 2-5, four to 20 inches of snow fell and 12 died. The fourth storm, March 8-10, left up to 15 inches on the ground.

For more information on Virginia Winters, visit our Web site at [www.vdem.state.va.us/library/vawinter/va-win.htm](http://www.vdem.state.va.us/library/vawinter/va-win.htm).



# Training Calendar

## Emergency Management

**Basic Public Info Officer Course**  
February 21-23/Williamsburg

**ISC/EOC Interface**  
February 27-28/Newport News

**State Emergency Response Team Exercise (SERTEX)✓**  
March 6/Richmond

**Disaster Related Needs of Seniors and Persons with Disabilities✓**  
March 8/Fairfax

**VEM Conference**  
March 13-16/Williamsburg

**Coordinator's Briefing**  
March 29/Charlottesville

## Reservist Training

✓ **See courses annotated under Emergency Management**

## Search and Rescue

**GSAR Institute (Part II)**  
February 23-25/Blue Ridge

**CAP GSAR Institute (Part I)**  
March 23-25/Ft. AP Hill

## Technological Hazards

**Public Safety Response to Terrorism - Management**  
February 23/Virginia Beach

**Chemistry of Hazardous Materials -** March 5-16/Va. Beach

**Public Safety Response to Terrorism - Awareness**  
March 24/Augusta

## Sustainable Communities *(continued from page 2)*

nail is pounded. She recommends making building codes stricter and requiring more inspections to ensure they are being followed in these hazardous areas.

Flash floods not only inundate low-lying areas, they undercut stream banks and wash away the land. A single storm can cost a property owner 50 feet of land. A setback from the edge of the riverbank becomes almost more important than the volume of water that flows over the top.

In areas where floods come on a regular basis, buildings built on posts or with first-level doors that let rising water flow through them have a better chance of surviving intact.

Another strategy Garcia recommends is to build infrastructure in less risky areas to encourage development and avoid building it in risky ones. Hazardous areas could serve as parks, greenbelts and other forms of land conservation.

Working around the limitations of the natural environment, Garcia says it is possible to create land developments that respect the ecosystems and allow owners to enjoy the beauty of the water.

**Editor's Note:** Visit our Web site at [www.vdem.state.va.us/emupdate](http://www.vdem.state.va.us/emupdate) for an expanded version of this article as well as an interview with Garcia. She may also be reached by e-mail at [MGARCIA@hsc.vcu.edu](mailto:MGARCIA@hsc.vcu.edu) or phone at (804) 828-2489. Contact Mary Camp at [mcamp@vdem.state.va.us](mailto:mcamp@vdem.state.va.us) or at (804) 897-6500, ext. 6583.

## Neighborhood involvement key for James City

While interest in emergency preparedness and mitigation usually peaks in the wake of a disaster, this momentum soon dissipates as these human dramas fade into memory.

Richard M. Miller, who wears many hats including emergency management coordinator for James City County, sees this apathy as an opportunity. In this month's Profile in Emergency Management, Miller takes a look at how to involve neighborhoods in emergency preparedness. Don't miss his insightful comments on our Web site at [www.vdem.state.va.us/emupdate](http://www.vdem.state.va.us/emupdate).



## Save precious artworks from disaster

When disaster strikes a community, it can sweep away museums and other cultural institutions along with everything else. Heritage Preservation, Inc., has prepared a brochure, "Resources for Recovery – Post-Disaster Aid for Cultural Institutions," on steps communities can take to protect irreplaceable treasures against loss.

Copies of this brochure are available from the VDEM Public Affairs Office. Contact Bertha Fegans at (804) 897-6510 or by e-mail at [bfegans@vdem.state.va.us](mailto:bfegans@vdem.state.va.us).



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